

Play Aesthetics Beyond Convention: Recreating the Essence of Ghanaian Storytelling for the Conventional Stage

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Abstract

The process of creating the production of *Samantaase Village* was embedded in the Ghanaian Anansesem tradition of storytelling. This tradition served as a framework within which the directors experimented with the transposition of a folktale onto the contemporary proscenium stage. Even though the works of Sutherland (1975), De-Graft (1991) and Owusu (1999) and others have preceded this experiment, almost all the resultant plays have put emphasis on either content (the dramatisation of the narrative), or on form (the storytelling structure). By centralising the aesthetics of the Anansesem genre in both form and content, we also sought to recreate the storytelling experience for an urbanised audience by inserting indigenous performance values into contemporary Ghanaian theatre. This is a significant departure from the previous experiments, particularly of Sutherland's. Although her experiment was similar to ours; in the sense that she also sought to adapt folktales onto the formal Ghanaian stage, her work was essentially told through dialogue. The narrator in *The Marriage of Anansewaa* (1975), for instance, was a lone voice, who appeared to provide summaries of what is said in dialogue.

But in our *Samantaase Village*, emphasis was given to narration, through the use of multiple narrators. Our experiment broke new grounds in its adoption of the aesthetics of the storytelling form, by keeping the story told through narration. This paper seeks to share our experiences of the processes of transposition and our engagement with and working through the main features of the storytelling genre.

Introduction

The transposition of the Anansesem experience onto the proscenium stage which resulted in *Samantaase Village* was a distinctive experiment

that needed to be documented not only for archival purposes but to capture the essence of the organic and fluid nature of the genre. This paper discusses the devising and playmaking process, giving prominence to the elements that make up the storytelling form rather than centralising the story.

As directors, the authors of this article were fascinated with the idea of drawing from indigenous performance aesthetics as source material and to discover its compatibility with a proscenium stage.¹ We sought to recreate the Ghanaian communal storytelling experience, which usually takes place within an arena. This suggests that the form will therefore be incompatible with the dictates of the proscenium stage. That notwithstanding, we set out to explore what new dynamics we could draw from the marriage of our folk theatre aesthetics with the proscenium stage. Perhaps, this explains why most of the *Anansesem* inspired plays are crafted to accommodate the conventions of the proscenium stage, a situation which does not necessarily project the storytelling experience. Dorgbadzi (2014: 210) reiterates this point when she says:

Although most of the *Anansesem* inspired play performances are interesting and entertaining, they fail to engage audiences as fully as the communal storytelling performance, which appears to possess more post-modernist traits of performance aesthetics. The seemingly uncontrolled and jovial atmosphere that characterises the post-modern theatrical art is often missed in (most) *Anansesem* inspired plays.

She further asserts that:

[This] convention [has] no inhibitions and no pretenses;[...] performances are presented “naked” with childlike innocence. The emphasis is on the play performance; and a good play needs no adornments to be liked. (211)

The *Anansesem* genre, which is an organic unit, is indeed a smooth blend of the story and its telling. The telling in this sense refers to the performance of the narration, which is done by both narrator and audience. This is possible because the stories are told from the community’s

¹ This was what Efua Sutherland did and we were seeking to push the boundaries.

repertoire or with recognisable indices from the people's traditions, which explain why the cultural homogeneity of narrator and audience is key. The performance usually begins with singing. The choices of songs are often folk songs or portions of folktale plots captured in songs or rhythmic recitals. During performance, the narrator is interrupted by audience members with questions, comments, songs and dances, etc. to break the monotony of the lone voice and also invite the participation of the audience, thereby creating a jovial and playful atmosphere. The narrator may also engage the audience in a spontaneous dialogue to enact parts of the story. The songs and recitals spring from three perceptions. The lead performer, the narrator, may start the song or recital if it is an integral part of the story being narrated. Secondly, if the story has no songs or recitals, audience members may interject into the narration. Finally, audience members may interrupt the narrator with a song or rhythmic recital of their choice. These extra performances from the audience create interludes called *mmoguo* in the Akan language. The *mmoguo* songs are sometimes folk songs sung to underscore a point made in the narration and at other times they are songs from other folktales sung for purely aesthetic purposes.² All these songs, recitals, dialogues and the like create effective interludes. Consequentially, the narration of the tale is artistically fragmented to create room for the development of its communal aesthetic quality. Casely-Hayford's (2015) idea of storytelling in African societies supports the significance of this cultural homogeneity. He contends that

Stories were the mechanisms through which many ideas find form, the mechanisms for preserving and promoting shared ideas and values [...]. That web, the cultural fabric of words created a somewhat ineffable, but formidable intellectual infrastructure. (25)

It is for this reason that every member of the audience is a potential storyteller and an interlude initiator. The number of performers and the various shifts in focus at each session, notwithstanding, the performances happen in a seamless and fluid transition that is engaging and relaxing. The success of this performance is largely dependent on the active participation of the audience. Our challenge in this experiment therefore was to replicate the essence of this experience and make it identifiable and relevant in an atmosphere of heterogeneous culture. This is a good point to

² In this instance, the interjection reinforces by explaining further or creating another context or a point that the narrator has made.

introduce the substance and apparatus used in our experiment for the furtherance of this discussion.

Synopsis of the Folktale

Bempong goes to his farm on a forbidden day to fetch his hoe. He finds a little child swinging in forest creepers. Thinking she was a lost child, Bempong brings home Samanta, a nymph of the forest. He bathes her and cuts her hair. The child begins to cry for her hair as it signifies her identity. The whole village becomes afflicted with disease, starvation, and persistent harrowing sounds. Some people die. Afrum, Bempong's son, whom everyone calls a fool because they do not understand him, saves the village. It takes the wisdom of the fool to save the community from its folly.

The starting point of our experimental process was identifying the elements that went into creating the structure of traditional storytelling. These include the narration, spontaneous dialogues, songs, recitals, etc. mentioned earlier.

Our audition process was informed by our quest for a cast with a certain indigenous cultural vocabulary. Thus, we asked our prospective cast members to demonstrate familiarity with indigenous knowledge of their culture. The approach unearthed interesting rhythms, songs and games which were useful in the development of our piece, although a majority of our prospective cast did not possess the kind of first-hand experience of storytelling that we expected. As a result, our selected cast was short of the knowledge that should underscore the creation of a piece like this, so we decided on the collaborative working method as an approach. Our method fell in line with the communal nature of the genre we were seeking to replicate. All members of the cast were therefore encouraged to interject at various stages in the creation process with indigenous songs and dances, games, etc., which are all prerequisite elements within the storytelling structure. Our working method was consistent with Govan, Nicholson and Normington's (2007) notion of devised theatre. They indicate that,

Devised theatre is often characterised by its emphasis on improvisation, on ensemble acting, on collective decision-making and skills sharing within a non-hierarchical company structure. (59)

Our adopted collaborative method, coupled with the challenges of co-directing a devised piece, in an atmosphere such as Govan, Nicholson and Normington's (2007) describe, brings with it possibilities of

divergence or the lack of clarity in directorial focus. The benefit of hindsight in the form of video recordings of the creation process proved to be a life-line in keeping focus on plot development. For instance, the rehearsals in the early stages were predominantly storytelling sessions with games, singing and dancing. The objective here was to introduce our cast to the communal storytelling experience, build a vocabulary and to break their inhibitions. The rehearsals at this point were organic and not necessarily directly developing a clear plot for the folktale we intended to tell. The viewing of the video documentation of these sessions provided us with the opportunity to make our choices of songs, games, movements, etc. for our development of the scenes and plot.

Whereas scenery and set, in contemporary theatre, are usually the largest visual effect in signification of location, in the storytelling situation, location is captured in narration. That is to say that the creation of scenery is virtual and impressionistic. This actively engages the imagination of the audience and the storyteller. In our bid to recreate the essence of this folk performance aesthetic, we decided to engage the bodies of the performers to create the various locations within the narrative. The idea was to allow for the fluid continuity of the imagination, which is a fundamental element of the storytelling process. This aesthetic decision became a central idea that informed the structure and nature of the work.

Narration and Dialogue

It being a folktale and embedded in oral tradition, there exist different accounts of the same story in various Ghanaian languages. In an attempt to arrive at a standard workable version, Sutherland's published version of the story titled *Samantaase Village* proved reliable. Her outline of the story became the stimulus for our final theatre event. The approach was in line with Radosavjević's (2013: 59) notion that "[o]n the methodological front, the key factor is the absence of a finished play text as a departure point." Within an environment such as described by Govan, Nicholson and Normington (2007), we sought to achieve the fragmentation of narration mentioned earlier. In our bid to marry the two genres of storytelling and contemporary theatre, we split up portions of narration among cast members. The entire cast together were the storytellers, categorised into two – players and narrators. According to Djisenu, (2000), Sutherland also made use of players in her Anansegoro genre.³ His observation is

³ See (Asiedu A. M., Ekumah, E and Dorgbadzi, S., 2011) for further discussions

discussed in more detail under the section on form. The choice of narrators identified as 'tellers' was based on voice quality and clarity of speech. Our composition of the narration beyond clarity was directed to give it a harmonious musical quality. Outside the narration, performers were accorded the freedom to create and own spontaneous dialogue in a bid to keep the actions fresh and real.

As mentioned earlier, the folktales are told by a storyteller to people of the same culture as the teller. Everyone knows and understands what goes on in the story. Everybody involved in this activity is able to lay claim to the story and identify with what goes on in it. Thus, their participation is natural. It is intuitive. In our situation where we were seeking to replicate the storytelling activity but with people of different cultural backgrounds, and nationalities as one would expect at an international conference, the question then was, how does one achieve homogeneity in a situation of heterogeneous cultures? In this instance, what is known as "Ghanaian culture" comes into focus. The Ghanaian national culture is but a blend of all sub-cultures in Ghana. Therefore, the 'Ghanaianess' of the cast presented a common denominator in our quest for homogeneity. From this reference, the cast created dialogue in any Ghanaian language of their choice but with special emphasis on their mother tongue if they were fluent in it. The use of mother tongue or an actor's familiar language in a performance creates an ease of execution of character expression and a marriage between body and verbal languages. This is because it is believed that the mother tongue or familiar language of the performer creates a certain level of natural competence. The result, usually, is the presentation of an intuitive expression. Asiedu *et al* (2011) underscore this point when they indicate that

This consideration of language as the actor's vehicle goes beyond the use of words and voice, beyond giving a creative interpretation of the character through the dialogue, to communicating his/her understanding of the character's psychology. (55)

Consequently, the diverse languages of the cast and our audience were incorporated into the piece in the contemporary approach we were working with. In order to achieve continuity of the story in the ears of the audience, narration was done in English. As we have established earlier, the use of multi-Ghanaian languages in the creation of extemporaneous dialogue within the scenes was directed at homogenising the heterogeneous background of both cast and audience.

Our focus on language in this play was twofold; verbal and body languages. In addition to the multilingual approach mentioned, there was

the need for the performers to support the verbal with recognisable and credible body languages and Ghanaian gesticulations. Dorgbadzi (2014) in a similar manner exemplifies with reference to the production process of *Samantaase Village* that:

The performers, university students, by way of getting them into the right frame of mind for this performance were asked to take off all masks in the form of nail and hair extensions, wigs, straightened or permed hair [fanciful hair-cuts, etc. in the case of male cast] and come into the performance as “themselves” wearing only native Ghanaian hair-styles. The point here was that any personal inhibitions, pretenses, or false mannerisms would reflect in their body language during performance and that would defeat the expected outcome of the experiment, which is an uninhibited childlike playful performance. (212)

The playful environment necessary for an uninhibited creative expression of this nature presents levels of developmental stages. For the purposes of this discussion, three major stages can be identified. These are creating the enabling environment, identifying structures and possibilities, and consolidation of form. The progression from one level to the other was guided by audio-visual documentation.

Form

The presence of the full cast on stage in full view of the audience was representative of the audience at the folk performance. They served as the immediate audience players for the narrators who were also conscious that the whole performance was for the benefit of the real audiences, which in this case are the paid audiences. Commenting on the use of players in Sutherland’s *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Djisenu (2000) indicates that

Sutherland makes use of “Players” to establish in the theatre something of the rapport that exists between actor and audience in a traditional story-telling performance. The players are there to represent the audience and to sing, clap, dance, drum at specific moments in the play. (38)

Whereas our players lived in the world of the play as animate and inanimate characters, Sutherland’s players performed outside the world of the play in a manner that can be described as ‘performers of musical interludes.’ Our use of the term ‘players,’ is rather more encompassing. The term refers to the cast of performers who are not narrating. In effect, all

cast members are players except when they are narrating. They also sustained the earlier-mentioned rapport between performer and audience. Djisenu (2000) describes this as providing “continuity and unity.” The fluid and flexible structure of the plot and the devised nature of the dialogue made the performance of *Samantaase Village* susceptible to over-elaborations of the scenes, and overacting. However, through the warm-up games and songs, the directors guided the performers to develop sensitivity to the ‘beauty of enough’. As a result, instances of playing to the gallery were effectively controlled. The performance thrived on the form it evolved with. The appreciation of the piece was not so much about the substance of the story, but rather the complete aesthetics of both the form and the content, which was a combination of the interjections and the songs, and the seamless transitions of the scenes. First and foremost, it was totally and completely non-illusionistic; everybody stayed on the stage whether they were “performing” or not. They all stayed on stage in a way that Sutherland (1975: ix), describes as a ‘skilful informality’.

In the indigenous storytelling situation, the performance of one story with all the interjections and interludes lasts approximately ten minutes. Even though we sought to follow the storytelling structure, our narration of one tale had to stretch to one hour. Thus in terms of duration we departed from the storytelling genre. Our use of multi-narrators, in a sense, was also a clear departure from both the folk performance and the conventions of most Anansesem inspired plays. In these plays, the likes of which were mentioned earlier, there is the use of a solo narrator. Again our piece went beyond this convention to explore multiple narrators as another way of breaking the monotony of the lone voice. Although it has been mentioned that the play was devised, the narration was spontaneously improvised and written down. Being the pillars around which the whole improvisation evolved, the narration needed to be consistent in order to make it possible for cues to be set for the frequent transformations and interludes. The cast members did not maintain one role. The extreme fragmentation of the lines with the variety of voices made it sound crisp and playful as the narrators assumed other roles before or after speaking their lines. The cast could start as mother or father and metamorphose into trees, rivers, tables, stools, fence wall, etc. Some narrators, for instance, became tree or parts of a bridge after delivering their lines. Others transformed from plants to narrators and back to plants. At some points in the performance, a whole fence wall transformed into a community for chorus responses and back. From a neutral position, a mother hen and her chicks played their role in establishing a scene and they blended back into the background as actors in a neutral but active position. This and the various interludes of songs, dances,

recitals and movements, made the resultant play (in performance) contemporary in outlook. It was not a straight strict drama nor was it a straight narration, dance, nor a musical piece. It was a bit of everything. In that state there was a kind of purposeful chaos, which in a sense is a representation of the lives we are living now. We are influenced from all angles and we draw from all of those. The production evolved on its own energy, not restricted to any form. Even though we were seeking to do drama, the plot of the play, essentially was not propelled by dialogue, it was propelled by narration.

Costume

With the exception of two characters, Afrum and Samanta, the ensemble costume was uniform, basic and convenient, black-on-black, to facilitate the constant change in roles as described earlier. The fluid nature of the scene transitions did not allow time to do the conventional scene changes with costumes and all.

The costumes of Afrum and Samanta were symbolic of the natural environment within which both of them thrived. Afrum's voluminous pair of trousers signified his freedom and an ease of execution of his movement, which was an interpretation of his relation to the elements. The brown long-sleeved, earthly-coloured body suit top was suggestive of a bare chest and his connection to his environment. He related to nature, the trees and animals he loved to protect, thus, his connection to Samanta. Samanta, though a spirit-being (nymph of the forest), appears in human form. Her first costume, consisting of a black top and a skirt constructed from creeper vine plant, was a reflection of her dual status. The black top indicated her human qualities while the vine skirt represented her connection with her natural habitat, the forest. The impetus of the main conflict of the story, the cutting of Samanta's hair, was Bempong's intention to highlight her human qualities above her spiritual nature even though he was not aware of this. The costume for this section, therefore, transformed to become that of the community's in shape but green in colour as a sign of her compromised identity.

Music and Movement

Music and movement were key elements within this experiment, as in the Ghanaian social and cultural fibres. They play multifarious roles as is consistent in Ghanaian life and reflected in the storytelling genre. (Nketia, 1975; Younge, 2011; Bebey, 1975; Ahenkorah, 2011). This performance embraces singing and rhythms of Ghanaian musical instrumentation both

of which are usually accompanied by movement. Movement here is in reference to stylised patterns of walking, through selection of some traditional Ghanaian dance forms and games, to choreographed dance movements. Because we did not use set and stage properties, we relied on performers' bodies to establish locale. Stylised motion therefore was key to ensure the smooth transformation of the entire players from fence to market and back to fence, for instance. So movement in this sense was narration and intrinsic in part; for example, in activities establishing scenes, indicating pounding and washing, the cutting of Samanta's hair, etc. The extrinsic occurred in all movements involving scene transitions and resolutions. For example, movements from the *agbadza*⁴ dance were used to transit Bempong's journey from the village through the forest to his farm. In the same way, the scene of Afrum's isolation from the community was resolved using *agbadza* movements. The multiplicity of the genre gave impetus for movement and song to interplay in meaning making. While movements were used as transition and resolutions of scenes as in the case of the song *Hɔana na akokɔ na wato ha yi?* (*Whose hen has come to lay eggs here?*)⁵ which functioned as a point of focus for the entire cast to exit a scene, Afrum's seclusion is embodied in the traditional song *Gɔmasɔmasɔ* (*Insufficiency is a difficult thing*)⁶. The collective feeling of despair in the community due to the breakdown of order was similarly captured in the song, *Adea woe lo* (*Hunters*)⁷.

The phenomenon of the intrinsic and extrinsic in movement was also replete in songs. In establishing a market location, the use of familiar sounds that we encounter everyday but do not take notice of was used to set it up rather than cluttering up the set with many props. The production took inspiration from occurrences in Ghanaian markets where there are calls and responses that traders and buyers engage in. So the lifting of this element of market life was to reconnect to the original space by emphasising the beauty of the mundane in everyday life. There were times when the performance moved out of the everyday and heightened the

⁴ A dance form of the Southern Ewe people of Ghana.

⁵ This is an Akan folk song.

⁶ The song literary means, "To be alone in challenging situations without a helper is a difficult experience to endure."

⁷ The animals have grazed into the town. Where are the hunters?

moment with everyone acknowledging the change in levels and dancing to the song as an aesthetic element in the work. The traditional Ewe lullaby *Toboli* (*Bouncing baby*) and the foreboding folk song *Santrofi anoma* (*The Albatross*) were significant cases where songs signified their intended purposes. The folk song *Anananuwoe*, *Ma die, ma die* and *Densue*, on the other hand, represented not only songs 'outside' the world of the play used to enhance mood, but were specifically selected in the team's bid to revive disappearing folk songs of the *Anansesem* genre.

The use of different elements from various Ghanaian cultures lifted this "storytelling" performance from a homogeneous sub-Ghanaian culture to a national or even an African dimension. Our experience is better expressed by (Casely-Hayford, 2015:25) when he states "Even today it remains possible to twitch what might seem an insignificant thread on the edge of the vast nexus of West African narrative activity and to see reverberations run broad and deep. Stories remain alive and contentious-seemingly humble narratives" such as *Samantaase Village*, with its organic, natural and playful quality, transcends itself. The performance became relatable on multiple levels, moving beyond not only the confines of the proscenium stage but the structures and prerequisites of the genre.

Conclusion

The Samantaase experiment creates the impression that there is a high possibility of indigenising the contemporary stage and contemporising Ghanaian storytelling without missing out on the aesthetics essence of the storytelling genre. This experiment therefore leaves room for further development of a theatrical aesthetics that is truly and indigenously Ghanaian.

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Play Aesthetics Beyond Convention: Recreating the Essence of Ghanaian Storytelling for the...

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